

Alexandra Chaves March 4, 2020

Berlin looks back at the work of late Emirati artist Hassan Sharif

The exhibition at the KW Institute for Contemporary Art marks the late artist's first retrospective in Europe



Sharjah Art Foundation's major retrospective on Hassan Sharif titled *I Am the Single Work Artist*. Held from 2017-2018, the exhibition charted the Emirati artist's career from 1973 to 2016, and displayed 400 of his 3,500 works. Courtesy Sharjah Art Foundation

Known as the godfather of conceptual art in the Gulf, Hassan Sharif shaped a community of artists, poets and filmmakers in the UAE for generations. When the Emirati artist died in 2016, his studio was donated to the Sharjah Art Foundation, which then presented a major survey of his work in November 2017, titled *I Am The Single Work Artist*.

The blockbuster exhibition has now travelled to KW Institute for Contemporary Art in Berlin, marking the artist's first retrospective in Europe. It was meant to

travel to Turin's Castello di Rivoli in 2019, but that was not realised. Curated by the foundation's president Sheikha Hoor Al Qasimi and KW Institute director Krist Gruijthuisen, the show, features 150 of the 350 works that were first presented in Sharjah.

"It's a walk-through of someone's practice over the past 40 years. There's something hysterical, megalomaniac and neurotic within the work of Sharif that can be captured with certain essential pieces," says Gruijthuisen. Much like the show in Sharjah, the KW iteration traces the artist's career from 1973 to 2016, highlighting various shifts in Sharif's concepts and materials.

The exhibition opens with Sharif's comics and series of self-portraits, then leads into his geometric paintings and eventually his large-scale sculptures and installations of everyday objects. This includes his 1981 mixed media work *Dictionary*, a hanging sculpture made of torn-out pages alongside photographs.

Born in the 1950s, Sharif witnessed the transformation of the Emirates after the discovery of oil and the unification of the country. He left in 1979 to study at the Byam Shaw School of Art in London, then returned in 1984 and began setting up contemporary art exhibitions in Sharjah. "To have this knowledge and bring it back into a context where nothing was developed on that level and introduce these mechanisms of conceptual and minimal art from a western point of view ... that, for me, made him an interesting character," says Gruijthuisen.

Though he was influenced by his time abroad, Sharif forged his own artistic vision coloured by his environment. He also worked closely with his contemporaries at the Emirates Fine Arts Society, such as Mohammed Kazem, Mohammed Ahmed Ibrahim and Hussain Sharif, together building the foundation for the UAE's art history.

His assemblages and sculptural installations – usually made with cheap and common materials such as plastic combs, slippers, zippers and brooms, and mixed with papier mache – reveal a playful, experimental nature to his practice and his creation of "systems" with use of repetition and colour.

After Berlin, the exhibition will travel to Malmo Konsthall in Sweden in the autumn.

I Am The Single Work Artist is at KW Institute for Contemporary Art until Sunday, May 3. More information is at www.kw-berlin.de